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LANGUAGE EVOLUTION: THE VIEW FROM ADULT SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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In the process of acquiring a second language outside the classroom, adult learners go through a stage that has been characterized as being (1) determined by a small number of organizational principles, (2) largely independent of the source or target language of the learner and (3) simple but successful for communication (Klein & Perdue, 1997). This stage is called the Basic Variety (henceforth BV). In the BV, a speaker constructs relatively short sentences and a striking characteristic of these sentences is that there is no inflection. Some examples of organizational principles of this variety are FocusLast ('put the information that is in focus, new information, in the end of the sentence') and AgentFirst ('the NP referent with the highest control comes first'). The BV is thus not seen as an imperfect version of the target language, but as an independent linguistic system.

In the talk I focus on the expression of *temporal displacement* (reference to past and future) in the BV. Languages generally have sophisticated ways to express temporal structure (tense and aspect), quite often through inflection on the verb. In the BV, verbs are used but usually not inflected. Still, people refer to past and future, and the way they do it seems a very effective and robust strategy, as in the following example from Starren (2001):

- (1) 'Gisteren ik bergen gaan naar' (p. 149)

Yesterday I mountains go to

Yesterday, I went to the mountains

In this example a temporal adverb is fronted to indicate that the event described took place in the past. This strategy is observed in learners of different languages (even when it is highly marked or ungrammatical), as well as speakers of homesign (Benazzo, 2009).

The fact that strategies like the above are structurally found in the BV, and that they are largely independent from source and target language, plus the observation that there are similarities between the BV and other 'restricted linguistic systems' like homesign and pidgin, makes it interesting for the debate about the emergence

and evolution of language. Evolutionary claims have been made on the basis of observations from the BV. E.g., Jackendoff (2002) hypothesises that the principles that govern the BV are fossil principles from *protolanguage*.

Data from the BV would be very welcome as a source of evidence in the language evolution debate, especially because a lot of data is available from learners of different source and target languages (Perdue, 1993). But to avoid mere speculations, we need to formulate precisely *what* the structures in the BV tell us about *which* aspects of the evolution of language, and *why*. Unfortunately, not many people have concentrated on these questions, although a general framework is sketched in Botha (2005). In the presentation, I concentrate on the hypothesis that data from the BV reveals information about early human language forms, and justify this hypothesis on the basis of two strategies that seem implicitly present in recent literature on restricted linguistic systems.

One strategy is to claim that the sentence structures found in BV utterances are direct reflections of cognitive biases, and that these biases were already present in our evolutionary ancestors. If we were to choose this strategy, we would have to explain why the cognitive structures that were relevant in our evolutionary ancestors are still relevant in speakers of the BV.

Another strategy becomes relevant once we take the claim seriously that utterances in the BV are shaped by communicative needs. The structure of the utterances in the BV might not be simply a reflection of the cognitive structures of their speakers, but be shaped indirectly by their usage of the structures in communication, and whether they reach communicative success.

I argue that, in order to arrive at a good justification for evolutionary claims on the basis of BV utterances, both strategies need to be taken into account, and I sketch a way to combine the two, by taking the second strategy as a basis, and showing that the role of cognitive biases can be incorporated in this approach.

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